New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Wish You Were Here"

Daily Mirror

June 26, 1952

'Wish You Were Here' Not Quite Up to Snuff

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Wish You Were Here" opened last evening at the Imperial Theatre to a fanfare of publicity. Leland Hayward and Joshua Logan prepped this one in town, sans a road tune-up. Three weeks of previews preceded the big night. From them came varying reports regarding the new arrival — good and bad.

Those who got an early glimpse of the musical were partly right. It's good and bad. The book is by Arthur Kober and Logan, based on Kober's hit "Having Wonderful Time." It's on the thin side and short of solid laughs. The adaptors introduce too many characters and situations, leaving themselves too little opportunity to develop them.

The score by Harold Rome is helpful. The music is pleasant, if sometimes reminiscent, and the lyrics are on the clever side. The ever reliable Don Walker has arranged the songs to the hilt, and Jay Blackton's orchestra comes through in fine style.

The plot has to do with a nice little secretary from Brooklyn, who goes to Camp Karefree in the Catskills for a two-weeks vacation and a fling at romance. She falls for a clean-cut kid serving as a waiter by day and a dance partner by night, to earn his way through law school. But the proprietor of a dress shop, who pictures himself a wolf, breaks up the match, though only for a little while. You know there's got to be a happy ending.

There are a number of sub-plots, but if you want to explore them you'll have to visit the Imperial. The main idea of the evening is to satirize those holiday resorts where lonely women knock themselves out trying to acquire a fellow or a husband among the help. There should be a lot of laughs in this concept, but there seldom are.

Jack Cassidy and Patricia Marand are ingratiating as the young romantics. Cassidy has a strong and effective voice. The authors have made Paul Valentine into a rather dull wolf. Sidney Armus, despite taking over the role of an harassed director of entertainment on short notice, does remarkably well with it.

John Perkins, Sammy Smith and Harry Clark get all possible from other camp characters. Clark, in our opinion the best comic on stage, is given but a couple of unprofitable walk-ons. The standout of the large cast is Sheila Bond. Her frenzied stepping and vitality give the production its brightest spark.

Jo Mielziner has designed fascinating trick settings, featuring railings that rise from the stage floor, a basketball court and a swimming pool. Reams have already been written about that swimming pool, but we should like to add that director Logan made too many sacrifices for the three or four minutes in which he uses it to excellent advantage. Robert Mackintosh has supplied appropriate costumes.

The Messers Shubert have spent a sizable fortune to redecorate the Imperial, in honor of its new occupant. Their expenditures make playgoing at that house more enjoyable.

Hayward and Logan are wonder boys of the modern theatre. Their percentage of hits has been fantastic. But they are not in top form this time out. We had a wonderful time at the Imperial occasionally, and we wanted to have one continuously. It should be reported, however, that majority of the first-nighters relished the new song-and-dancer. They were generous with applause of the robust variety.

"WISH YOU WERE HERE"

Musical comedy by Arthur Kober and Joshua Logan; based on Mr. Kober's play "Having Wonderful Time"; music and lyrics by Harold Rome; direction and dances by Mr. Logan; costumes by Robert Mackintosh; scenery by Jo Mielziner; presented by Leland Hayward at the Imperial Theatre, June 25, 1952. The cast:

Teddy Stern.... Patricia Marand
Chick Miller.....Jack Cassidy
Fay Fromkin.....Sheila Bond
Itchy Flexner.....Sidney Armus
Pinky Harris.....Paul Valentine
Harry "Muscles" Green.....
John Perkins
Lou Kandel.....Sammy Smith
Herman Fabricant..Harry Clark
Marvin.....Fred Sadoff
Sonja.....Elaine Gordon
Schmutz.....Larry Blyden
Eli.....Frank Aletter
Barney.....Ray Hyson
Sid.....Robert Dixon
Lenny.....Richard France
Sam.....Joe Milan
Monty.....Tom Ayre
Henrietta.....Mardi Bayne
Gussie.....Leila Martin
Irma.....Roslynd Lowe
Shirley.....Sybil Lamb
Lena.....Denise Griffin
Judy.....Shirley Ann Prior
Miriam.....Nancy Franklin
New Girl...Florence Henderson
Girl Driver.....Beverly Weston
Acrobat.....Steve Wiland
Eccentric Diver..Joseph Thomas

DAILY NEWS

June 26, 1952

'Wish You Were Here' a Big Show And a Good One in Any Heat Wave

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Arthur Kober's sharp but sentimental comedy, "Having Wonderful Time," has been made into a smart, sentimental and bountifully picturesque musical comedy, "Wish You Were Here." Only a really good show could overcome the double handicap this production faced last night — a record-breaking heat wave outside the Imperial Theatre and a near-record cold wave from the posh Broadway first night audience. "Wish You Were Here" is a good show—a very good one—and I'm glad for its sake that the opening is over with. Now it can settle down, smooth over some of the rough cuts which were apparent in the first performance, and pursue its happy business of depicting life in Camp Karefree, a Catskill Mountains resort.

The book, by Kober and Joshua Logan, describes with affection the desperate social life of a holiday inn on the borscht trail. It tells of man-hungry young females and woman-weary young men; of frantic shows, contests and picnics; of boys and girls who for two hard-earned weeks a year can escape the city for the mountains and relax in a weird pandemonium.

Good Songs That Bounce.

The songs, by Harold Rome, are excellent, be they love ballads or satirical numbers like the funny opening song, "Camp Karefree." Rome is one of those rare workers, a man who can turn a phrase both lyrically and musically. One of his second-act numbers, "Relax," is an ingenious exercise in counterpoint, and many others have high humor. All of the score has bounce, thanks to Don Walker's orchestrations and Jay Blackton's orchestra.

"Wish You Were Here" has been patiently putting itself together at the Imperial for several weeks, so it can be no news that the scenery includes a swimming pool. Indeed, it includes much more than that, for Jo Mielziner has contrived all the astonishing environs of Camp Karefree — social hall, lakeside, cabins, picnic grounds, woods and the front porch. If it had been the work of a lesser genius than Mielziner, all this scenery might have interfered with the main business of the musical—the simple business of getting boy and girl together; but Mielziner is no lesser genius, so his scenery is enchanting. The swimming pool, a triumph of optics as well as engineering, provides a comforting first-act finale involving much diving and splashing and the dunking of two baddies who deserve to be dunked.

Young and Spirited.

The cast of "Wish You Were Here" is young, attractive and high-spirited. It owes most, I think, to the work of Sheila Bond in the role of a Bronx lass named Fay Fromkin. Miss Fromkin, a near relative of Kober's Holywood agent, Benny Greenspan, is a good-hearted young dope who does wonderful tricks with the English language. She looks for somebody in every nook and granny. A certain type person is a drudge on the market. And she herself confesses that she should go to a brain specialist and have her chromium examined.

Last evening Miss Bond acted this role to perfection, but few in the strange audience seemed to realize it. I think they thought they were hearing plain English.

Patricia Marand is a fine and lovely lass for the role of the ingenue, Teddy Stern. Paul Valentine has extraordinary presence as an amiable villain, and Jack Cassidy is pleasant as Miss Marand's young lover. There are some nice comedy roles for Sidney Armus, Harry Clark and Sammy Smith. Smith has the role of the nagging, hard-driving proprietor of Camp Karefree. When something particularly horrendous has gone wrong with his social program, somebody calls the warning, "Kandal is burning at both ends." I guess I should have my chromium examined, because that's the kind of joke I like.

The New York Times

June 26, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"Relax," says Harold Rome in the title of a song for "Wish You Were Here," which opened at the Imperial last evening. Without lacking appreciation for a lavish production, a theatregoer could wish that Mr. Rome and his associates had taken their own advice.

The principal associates are Arthur Kober, who wrote "Having Wonderful Time" fifteen years ago, and Joshua Logan, who has helped him translate it into a musical and who has also attended to the direction and the dances. Mr. Logan is the wonderman of the musical stage. He has staged "Wish You Were Here" within an inch of its life and endowed it with an expensive swimming pool for some comic hocus-pocus at the end of the first act.

* * *

Despite the exactitude of the casting and the versatility of the group staging; despite a swimming contest, a basketball game, a weeny-roast and some social dancing, there does not seem to be any way of avoiding the blunt fact that a humorous, tender, romantic comedy has been flattened out into a one-dimensional, repetitious Broadway show.

For "Having Wonderful Time," in which Jules Garfield, as he was then known, and Katherine Locke made names for themselves in our theatre, had a heart at the base of all the awkward humors and gaucheries it found in the lives of the young Jewish people it described. They were desperately trying to make the most of two furious vacation weeks in a summer camp organized for romance and enlightenment. There was some winning New York folklore affectionately sprinkled through it.

* * *

Mr. Logan has produced a spectacular and rushing musical show. Sheila Bond, Patricia Marand, Sidney Armus, Jack Cassidy, John Perkins and Paul Valentine play the hunters for romance and the masculine partners and entertainers with a good deal of charm and skill. Mr. Rome's long score includes some good romantic music, like "Wish You Were Here," "Tripping the Light Fantastic," "Certain Individuals" and "Where Did the Night Go," and some amusing songs, like "Social Director" and "Don José." Jo Mielziner has ably filled a large order for outdoor scenery, including that celebrated swimming pool, complete with lighting and mirrors.

But there is no tenderness under the panoply of this expertly organized musical show. It lacks variety and subtlety. For all its friskiness, it is joyless; and it gives the impression of saying the same thing over and over again. The dancing is tight and routine.

The pace of the performance is hard and tiring. Nearly everything is overacted as though Mr. Logan and his associates were afraid that the audience would not know how satirical it is. What was warm and disarming fifteen years ago has become cold and mechanical. It goes through the motions with professional authority. But it represents the triumph of showmanship over sympathy for some obscure but lovable human beings.

Journal American

June 26, 1952

Singularly Unfunny; Cast Only Adequate

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE was a basis of solid humor in Arthur Kober's "Having Wonderful Time," a comedy concerned with the rather bewildered machinations of a group of Bronx vacationers in a Summer camp in the Catskills.

But I think most of the essence is missing from "Wish You Were Here," the Leland Hayward-Joshua Logan musical adaptation which was presented at the Imperial Theatre last night.

I suppose the boys started out to achieve a literal translation, but somewhere along the trail they got carried away by swimming pools, basketball courts and all the dilution that goes with a Grade B musical comedy plot.

As it emerges it is singularly unfunny, and only moderately melodious. It is not performed with any great eminence, either, and the trick of introducing an actual swimming pool into the proceedings merely made last night's sweltering audience wish they could jump in with the cast.

Not that there's anything wrong with swimming pools onstage. The mermaids (trained, I am told, by Eleanor Holm Rose) perform with exquisite precision within their limited orbit, the boys dive gracefully and real water splashes out almost to the footlights. And of course the various villains get dunked.

But none of this is enough to make up for a dreary book. They could have either taken Kober's original property, the play, and pursued it faithfully with a group of strictly Uptown characters (see "Guys and Dolls"); or they could have forgotten the original idea entirely and made it just a big, bright and beautiful musical, set around a pool. In its present form it is a flatulent compromise.

Even so, there are moments when Logan's genius raises its hallowed head, notably "Tripping the Light Fantastic," with Sheila Bond, in the first act, and "Everybody Love Everybody" in Act II.

I thought Jack Cassidy did quite well with a couple of Harold Rome's ballads, "Where Did the Night Go?" and "Wish You Were Here." I'm afraid the other featured players come under the heading of that horrible word, "adequate."

In producing this musical the management chose to gamble everything by building their swimming pool into the stage of the Imperial Theatre and trying the show out here in town for the past several weeks. Thus they ran the great risk of being stuck with the pool.

But in this weather—is that bad?

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

June 26, 1952

'Wish You Were Here'

By Walter F. Kerr

LELAND HAYWARD and Joshua Logan brought their newest musical extravaganza, "Wish You Were Here," into the Imperial last night, and, as producers, they have knocked themselves out seeing to it that the customers get their money's worth. They have built a life-size swimming pool into the Imperial's stage floor, and, come the first-act finale, some young and exuberant performers have a spirited time pushing one another into it.

Nor have they settled for this single shot at spectacle. The second-act curtain comes down on a full-scale and ingeniously conceived basketball game in which baskets are safely scored on music cue. For good measure, there's a blazing fire that burns down the recreation room of a summer camp, an outdoor barbecue pit which glows prettily, and a sudden shower with elaborate rain effects.

In short, a lot of shrewd stagecraft has been poured into the summertime frolic which Arthur Kober and Joshua Logan have adapted from Mr. Kober's earlier, and very successful, comedy, "Having Wonderful Time." Jo Mielziner has put the many and glittering stage designs into wonderful working order, Logan has directed his own show with his usual keen eye for pictorial effect, and everything which can be managed mechanicaly is in first-rate shape.

But "Wish You Were Here" remains a fairly mechanical show. It hasn't much humor, and it hasn't much heart. The goings-on at Camp Karefree in the Catskills, where love and lust make the most of a two-week breather, have been given patient, careful and detailed treatment. Everything vacationers do is done on stage at the Imperial, but with almost no special comic inflection, and with very little honest nostalgia.

In the process of rewriting Mr. Kober's fetching play for songs and dances, a couple of things seem to have happened. For one thing, the American-Yiddish background and the American-Yiddish rhythms which gave the original play its unique claim to distinction, its flavorful character humor, and its great warmth, have been glamorized out of existence.

Many of the lines still have the old echoes ("I assume from your use of the word 'boss' that you are employed") but they are read like the cliches of standard musical comedy, and the fun slips away. The people themselves seem without environment, and it becomes difficult to get worked up over the sentimental shenanigans which crop up when a boy turns a girl down because he is afraid he can't support her. You get the feeling that he ought to be able to support her on what it costs to spend two weeks at Camp Karefree.

Not that these things would matter so much if there were an injection of really robust random humor, or if the tunes took over where the sentiment failed. Some of the invented gags, though, are pretty brutal: the camp manager's name is Kandel, and one of the youngsters must rush on stage to shout that "Kandel is coming, and he's burning at both ends."

Harold Rome's score is occasionally attractive—the title song is easy on the ears, and "Tripping the Light Fantastic" has a delicate charm—but ballads were never Mr. Rome's long suit, and the comedy lyrics which have been his mainstay in past musicals are this time curiously feeble. He hasn't been able to devise anything very sharp or slyly pointed for Sidney Armus, the show's principal comedian, to sing, and when he gets onto one of those eccentric duets—here called